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ABSTRACT

Creating an empowering and positive classroom environment requires focusing on the processes of developing trust in self and others, participation and communication in the classroom. Establishing a classroom that accommodates diverse students who have varied backgrounds, interests, and preferences poses a challenging situation for university teachers who must adapt their teaching methods to provide students with multiple opportunities to succeed. One such method worth examining is the use of storytelling or personal narratives for students in basic communication courses. Teachers who share personal narratives to promote understanding of communication concepts may help co-create a classroom culture in which students feel comfortable sharing personal stories that relate to the same concept. A narrative assignment, "Conflict Storytelling," illustrates specifically the communication concepts of perception, empathy, proximity, inference, point of view, and selective retention, which students can easily relate to their lives and personal experiences. Through use of such pedagogy in the communication classroom, teachers may orient students to different ways of knowing, learning, and making sense of communication concepts. (Contains a handout of the storytelling assignment and 29 references.) (CR)

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"Using Personal Narratives as a Pedagogical Tool: Empowering Students Through Stories"

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> I am me. In all the world, there is not one exactly like me. There are people who have some parts like me but no one adds up exactly like me. Therefore, everything that comes out of me is authentically mine because I alone choose it.
>
> - Virginia Satir

It is easy to look at a university class as a sea of faces. A university classroom is filled with individuals who have diverse interests and backgrounds. Obvious as this point may be, teachers may sometimes be unmindful of this notion due to preoccupation with any number of considerations. I believe it is imperative that educators recognize that university classrooms are populated with individual persons, not unnamed masses. Cooper and Stewart (1982) suggest that "it is important that teachers deal with students as individuals not as groups or stereotypes" (p. 23). Teachers have the potential to make a profound impact on students' lives. As a university level communication educator, one of my pedagogical objectives is to create an empowering and positive classroom experience for each student.

Student Empowerment

Creating an empowering environment requires focusing on the processes of developing trust in self and others, participation and communication in the classroom (Brunson & Vogt, 1996). "Students whose input is solicited feel a greater sense of ownership with the educational process, and this, in turn, increases student engagement in all aspects of school" (Johnson, 1991, p. 2). Brunson and Vogt (1996) state that "empowerment occurs by enhancing individuals' ownership and control" of a situation (p. 73). Student empowerment is characterized by control over his/her own life and allowing the same to others. Robinson (1994) suggests that:

> empowerment is marked by respect for each individual in the group based not on a position of authority or the skills of each individual but on the sense that each person has a valuable contribution to make, each has a unique voice that echoes the unique experiences of the individual and joins in the voices of others in the classroom community. (p. 159)

In order to create an empowering environment the student deserves to be taken into consideration and respected as an individual. Each student has distinct qualities, preferences, talents, skills and a learning style, which in combination, make her or him unique.

Empowered students see themselves as significant contributors to the classroom environment whose ideas and contributions are respected (Byham, Cox & Shomo, 1992). Empowered individuals gain satisfaction from success of activities to which they are involved and committed (Byham, Cox & Shomo, 1992). Mirman, Swartz and Barell (1988) tell us that "having both knowledge itself and a climate in which that knowledge is used and valued is necessary to empower teachers and students" (p. 146).

Ira Shor (1986) suggests a pedagogy of empowerment "that is participatory, critical, values-oriented, multicultural, student-oriented, experiential, research-minded and interdisciplinary" (p. 418). Experiential pedagogical tools, such as storytelling, may help students develop the trust in themselves and in others

through classroom interaction. Higher education is based on the beliefs of dignity and efficacy of diverse individuals within the learning environment (Kasworm, 1993).

Student Diversity As a Classroom Factor

The diverse backgrounds of college students enrich university classrooms and challenge conventional teaching strategies. In recent years the arrival of international students to the United States has led to one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse societies in history (Dembo, 1991). Kasworm (1993) tells us "we need to speak to the uniqueness of every student, rather than creating ghettos of exclusion" (p. 163).

Today's university students represent a myriad of backgrounds, traditions and languages (Putnam, 1993). Every human being conveys a unique perspective of his or her world and cultural identity when s/he steps into a university classroom (Kasworm, 1993).

"One of the pressing duties of educators is responding to the needs, not only of academically diverse students, but also of culturally heterogeneous students, in their classrooms" (Williams, 1993, p. 145). Lutzker (1995) believes it is essential for students in this country to "understand that we are all 'the other' to the rest of the world" (p. 1). Clearly, university students reflect a wide diversity of cultural, age-related and cognitive perspectives (Kasworm, 1993).

Student diversity in the communication classroom is important to understand for two pedagogical reasons: "(1) cultural differences may result in differences in learning style and (2) understanding cultural differences can help us communicate more effectively with our students" (Cooper, 1995, p. 280). Putnam (1993) stresses the importance for consideration of "the unique needs, characteristics, and learning styles of all students in the design and delivery of instruction" (p. 11). In order to effectively combine students who have challenging academic and cultural needs in classrooms today, there is a need to create learning environments that deny isolation, rejection and stereotyping (Putnam, 1993).

Establishing a classroom that accommodates diverse students who have varied backgrounds, interests and preferences poses a challenging situation for university teachers. Chen and Goldring (1994) suggest that schools with a "diverse student body may be more open to innovative teaching strategies and ideas" (p. 58). Alternative teaching methods increase the likelihood that students receive positive avenues for achieving success in the classroom. The nature of today's diverse classrooms calls for teachers to adapt their teaching methods to provide students with multiple opportunities to succeed. Thus, a virtual repertoire of innovative teaching strategies is warranted. One teaching method worth examining is the use of storytelling or personal narratives for students in basic communication courses.

The Need for Diverse Teaching Methods

Elkins (1996) states "a teacher who knows only one teaching strategy is like a chef who knows only how to prepare one meal" (p. 41). Rubin (1989) relates that good pedagogy requires knowledge of subject, a knowledge of method, a knowledge of organizational techniques, and a knowledge of communicative devices. Some teaching methods work successfully for some objectives or for some types of

students but are less effective for other objectives and students (Englert, 1984). A diverse student population with diverse learning preferences call for a variety of teaching methods. An important objective for teachers, then, is to recognize, accept and value the diversity of students. For teachers an "awareness of individual differences will make educators more sensitive to their role in learning" (Jonassen & Grabowski, 1993, p. viii). "Master teachers consider a variety of elements in making instructional choices" (Rubin, 1989, p. 32).

Most educators recognize that motivation is essential for all students. If a student fails at a task, the perceived feedback introduces the possibility of a lack of ability and can create feelings of inferiority (Dembo, 1994). Once the student views the task as problematic s/he may avoid the obstacle rather than face rejection or failure again. Teachers then might consider offering students more than one way to accomplish a task. By varying teaching strategies teachers communicate that there is more than one method for students to succeed, regardless of their learning preference. Faries (1993) states that:

> Teachers need an available repertoire of communication strategies and the skill to utilize them including the ability to select strategies appropriate for their students. To select appropriate strategies teachers need to consider educational level, cultural diversity, course content and situational content. (p. 6)

Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1991) tell us that students "engaged in learning which they find personally meaningful and rewarding...require neither external rewards nor competitive prizes in order to pursue these activities" (p. 163). Encouraging student participation and varying teaching strategies may help promote student-centered, empowering classrooms in basic communication classrooms.

General Benefits of Personal Narratives and Stories in the Classroom

Having used personal narratives and stories in my classroom, I realize how much I learn about my students and about myself from shared stories. This method of teaching allows students to recognize that we, as educators, are individuals with separate identities and lives outside the classroom, just as they are. Personal narratives I use in class help illustrate self-awareness, my culture, social roles, and how effective communication influences these parts of my life. These examples help give me credibility as a teacher by illustrating my life experiences as they relate to how communication skills impact those experiences. Connecting observed or personal behavioral patterns to communication concepts may provide relevance to students' attempts to link course materials to their everyday communication practices.

In developing interpersonal relationships, disclosure may help develop trust in a reciprocal manner. Teachers who share personal narratives, in order to promote understanding of communication concepts, may help co-create a classroom culture in which students feel comfortable sharing personal stories that relate to the same concept. Through the process of sharing personal narratives, for this purpose, the classroom.community may share in the immediacy of a collective experience.

One must be cautioned, however, that teachers wishing to incorporate this method in the classroom must be willing to be role-models as storytellers themselves. This is not to say that teachers must demonstrate perfect storytelling performances. Rather, teachers need to be willing to share personal experiences if students are asked to do the same. Simply stated, teachers should be willing to illustrate communication concepts and skills with examples from everyday, lived situations: (i.e., examples from personal experience or observed experiences of others). Teachers must first feel comfortable using this teaching method, just as they must be comfortable using a lecture format in order for it to be used effectively. "Good methods, used badly, produce little of value" (Rubin, 1989, p. 32). Under the circumstances of sound pedagogical practices, teachers might not wish to consider using this strategy if they are uncomfortable disclosing personal examples. Students will immediately recognize a teacher's discomfort and the effectiveness of the teaching method will be lost. Rubin (1989) reminds us that "each teacher must draw upon personal attributes and competencies in fashioning an efficacious method" (p. 32).

A narrative approach to teaching evokes narrative responses from students. Cooper and Stewart (1982) recommend "one of the ways in which teachers affect...acquisition of language skills is through modeling" and advise that without interaction between students and teachers, modeling has less impact (p. 11). Using storytelling and personal narratives as one pedagogical method could positively influence language acquisition by exposing students to others' language use. This method of instruction might also strengthen individuals' word choice as they strive to effectively relate a story or personal narrative to communication skills or concepts.

For many individuals, storytelling and personal narratives yield great insight and a deeper understanding of the world around us, a way of knowing, a search for meaning (Conquergood, 1993), a means of reflection (Pelias, 1993). Through the use of this teaching method, students may come to a better understanding of specific communication concepts by linking them to personal experiences through oral reflection. Oral sharing of experiences and events is a natural part of our everyday lives which helps us conceptualize our life experiences (Langellier, 1989; Stahl, 1983). Greene (1994) claims that "narratives, we have come to realize, are the means by which we gradually impart meaning to the events of our own lives" (p. 14).

Storytelling Activity

The following narrative assignment, Conflict Storytelling, which I designed, illustrates specifically the communication concepts of perception, empathy, proximity, inference, point of view and selective retention, which students can easily relate to their lives and personal experiences. In this exercise, personal narratives and stories help create a context from which to discuss and understand specific communication concepts.

HANDOUT

Conflict Storytelling

This is a writing exercise, which will be due the beginning of the next class meeting. The assignment is to recall and describe a minor conflict you had with a family member or close friend: someone with whom you are well acquainted. This conflict might comprise a disagreement about borrowing something from a family member without obtaining permission, coming home later than curfew, not following through with a promised meeting or arranged activity, etc.

Take time to analyze and describe the actual incident, without incorporating emotions or feelings. You are to objectively (as a camera would record) report what is visible to the eye of an observer. In other words, synthesize the story and report the facts. **Just the facts.**

Example:

> Two friends, Kelly & Misha agreed to meet at the Dairy Queen on Main St. at 7:00 on Friday. Misha arrived at 7:08 to find Kelly not there. Misha waited ten minutes, then walked across the street to call Kelly's house. There was no answer at Kelly's house, so Misha walked back to the DQ, waited five minutes longer, then went home.
>
> The next day Misha & Kelly ran into one another at the laundromat and argued about who blew off the evening. Each person left after ten minutes of arguing and nothing was resolved.

Your assignment may be as short as 2 paragraphs and probably no longer than one page. Make sure that whomever reads your report can tell exactly what occurred, as if they witnessed the conflict. Be prepared to share your story aloud with the class. (Worth 30 points once shared aloud in class)

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This assignment works particularly well with chapters discussing perception, perspective-taking, self-esteem, empathic listening, dialectic tension, impression management, emotions, conflict styles, etc. Students are assigned to write and bring to class a personal narrative stating just the facts (leaving out emotions) of a minor conflict in which they were involved. The assignment is given one class prior to the due date. Students are told they will be asked to share this story aloud with classmates.

Students sit in a circle as they relate 'their' story from an other's perspective. They are asked to tell the conflict from the other's point of view (perspective). If the conflict was between Bobby and his mother; Bobby now must tell the story from his mother's perspective. In effect, Bobby says, "Hi, I'm Bobby's mother..." and tells the story in her words (or as close as possible).

Rationale: Inferences must be made according to what students perceive as the other's thoughts. Students often find this extremely difficult. However this activity helps them realize how often we (humans) fail to see situations/conflicts from an other's perspective, even when we think we do. Student empowerment arises

from the realization of how we might effectively view a conflict from an other's point of view and the process necessary to reach that view.

Debriefing: I suggest allowing ample time for debriefing during class; ideally, 15-20 minutes. Questions involving full class discussion may be best sought from open-ended questions such as: How did switching roles influence your point of view? How did telling the story of conflict help you realize an other's perspective? What emotions did this exercise help you realize the other might have experienced during the conflict? How might this experience affect your communication during future conflicts? How was this activity helpful to your understanding the other's behaviors?

Conclusion

Telling a personal narrative or story gives value and significance to events in a student's life (Brown, 1995). I believe the use of personal narratives in the classroom to facilitate understanding of communication concepts has the potential to give an individual's lived experiences validity and efficacy regardless of their preferred learning style. Educators interested in teaching diverse student populations should no doubt appreciate occasions to explore multiple pedagogical options and learning opportunities for the individual student.

Teachers who take the time to listen to and validate students' stories or personal narratives communicate positive attitudes toward listening skills and help to facilitate an empowering learning environment. Through oral assignments similar to the above exercise, students may feel empowered as participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

This potentially empowering instructional tool facilitates the creation of a "shared experience in the classroom" (Hogg, 1995, p. 2) with peers and with the teacher. Discovery of self and others through personal narratives and stories might certainly prove beneficial for students and instructors. Pagano (1991) believes that "selfhood begins in imagination, through processes of identification encouraged by the stories that we tell each other" (p. 266). By sharing one's personal narratives, one may realize the relevance, validity and efficacy of her/his lived experiences.

Through the use of this pedagogy in the communication classroom, teachers may orient students to different ways of knowing, learning and making sense of communication concepts. I do not suggest that storying should be considered a replacement for current teaching strategies for any communication course. Pagano (1991) suggests "students' stories and questions do not displace the curriculum or the texts; they become part of it, just as our own stories and questions are part of our teaching" (p. 266). By utilizing the benefits of this pedagogical strategy in communication classrooms, I believe educators could help expand students' creative and cognitive abilities. While taking the individual into consideration, educators using multiple teaching methods could validate unique as well as shared qualities. According to Pagano (1991), "Through storytelling we may find what is common to us as well as what distinguishes us" (p. 266).

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